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ABSTRACT

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Making and Writing Words.

by Timothy Rasinski

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CS 217 204

Making and Writing Words

Timothy Rasinski

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Abstract

Making and Writing Words is a variation of Making Words, a popular spelling and word study instructional activity. In Making and Writing Words, students are guided by their teacher in writing and sorting words using a limited set of letters. Teachers have found that the activity is engaging and appears to be helpful in developing students' proficiency in word recognition and spelling.

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About the Author

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Timothy Rasinski

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Introduction and Background

In Making Words, an innovative word study and word play activity introduced by Pat and Jim Cunningham (1992), students are guided through the process of using a limited number of letters to make a series of words. They begin by creating short words and end with longer ones. Through the regular use of this type of constructivist and scaffolded word-building activity, students learn about the spelling structure of words to the point where their word recognition improves significantly.

Making Words is one part of the word-study block in a multimethod, multilevel reading instruction program for elementary students (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1991; 1998). The activity has become an effective and popular approach for teaching students about words. Although research about Making Words itself is not yet available, standardized and informal measures have demonstrated remarkably positive results in the reading development of children in the early grades who receive instruction based on the overall program of which the activity is an integral part (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998). In their review of phonics instruction programs, Stahl, Duffy-Hester, and Stahl (1998) categorize Making Words as a spelling-based contemporary phonics approach and claim that it "seems to be effective as part of overall approaches to teaching reading" (p. 347). Moreover, Making Words appears to manifest several of the principles of effective phonics instruction identified by these authors.

I have used the approach with students in our reading clinic with great success, and I have talked with numerous teachers who have used Making Words in their classrooms. Without exception, it seems that teachers who employ Making Words with their students find it a highly valuable tool for teaching word recognition. This is not to say that the activity has no drawbacks, however. For some teachers, a negative aspect involves the logistics and ease of use of Making Words.

To do the activity, each student uses a set of small squares of paper or card stock on which individual letters are written. Students manipulate their letter squares to form words of varying lengths. Often when I work with small groups, I have a set of letter squares of my own and I do the activity along with the students. Invariably I find that handling those small squares can be difficult, for myself and for many. For those of us with less than nimble fingers, it is simply a challenge to move the squares. In addition, letter squares are lost during and after the activity -- they fall to the floor, are accidentally torn or bent, get stuck to the table, or fly away when someone creates a breeze when walking by. Students then ask for new squares or spend their time on the floor, searching for missing letters. All this takes away from the activity itself, and students lose some opportunities to think about language, manipulate letters and sounds, and make words. Indeed, the process of making, sorting, distributing, and collecting letter cards can consume a significant amount of time -- time that could have been devoted to word study.

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Making and Writing Words: A Variation on Making Words

While Making Words as described by Cunningham and Cunningham (1992) is conceptually an engaging and effective instructional task, for some of us its implementation is daunting. To address the problems of manual dexterity and time lost managing letter squares, I developed a variation that I call Making and Writing Words

(MWW). The major difference between the two activities is that in Making Words students manipulate letter cards, while in MWW students actually write the words on a sheet of paper designed to accommodate the activity, such as that shown here:

Making and Writing Words

Vowels	Consonants

1	6	11
2	7	12
3	8	13
4	9	14
5	10	15

T-1	T-2	T-3

(A blank copy master of this chart is available by clicking here. Readers are free to download, print, and copy this chart for educational use.)

Whether it is used with individuals or with a large or small group, each student receives a blank MWW sheet on which to write the words he or she will make. The teacher has his or her own MWW sheet projected using an overhead projector. All students are therefore engaged in making and writing words as they are guided through the activity by their teacher.

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The Activity in Action

As in Making Words, MWW begins with the identification of vowels and consonants to be used in the lesson. Students each write these letters at the top of their MWW sheets. In the empty boxes underneath, students will write words made from the letter set. Before they begin, the teacher reminds them that the word they write in any box may contain only letters listed at the top of the page, and that each letter may be used only once per word unless it appears more than once in the list at the top. Part 1 of the activity then starts with the teacher pronouncing or giving a clue to a word that the students write in the first box.

Here is how the activity might play out in the classroom:

The teacher instructs the students to write the following letters in the appropriate boxes on their individual MWW sheets: the vowels a, a, i, and o; and the consonants c, n, t, and v. She also asks them to write an apostrophe, placing it for convenience in the consonants box, and uses this time to review briefly the nature and role of apostrophes in making words. The sheets at this point would look something like this:

Making and Writing Words

Vowels	Consonants
a,a,i,o	c,n,t,v,'

1	6	11
2	7	12
3	8	13
4	9	14
5	10	15

T-1	T-2	T-3

The teacher then either pronounces or gives clues to words, beginning with a few having only two or three letters and moving on to longer words:

> "In box number 1 write a two-letter word that means the opposite of *out.* [Students write the word in box 1.] Good. Now, words that contain *in* belong to a word family. In box 2 I'd like you to write a three-letter word that belongs to the *in* word family. Here's another clue: the word is a kind of metal. [Students write *tin* in box 2.]
>
> "Now, in boxes 3, 4, and 5 please write three words that belong to the *an* word family. Remember, all *an* words will rhyme and you can only use the letters listed in the consonant and vowel boxes."

This sheet would now be partially completed:

Making and Writing Words

Vowels	Consonants
a,a,i,o	c,n,t,v

1 in	6	11
2 tin	7	12
3 can	8	13
4 tan	9	14
5 van	10	15

T-1	T-2	T-3

The teacher continues with the class through other three-letter words such as *not* and *cot* for boxes 6 and 7 and *oat* for box 8. Then it's on to longer words:

> "Great job, class. Now let's work on some longer words. In box 9 write the contraction for the word *cannot.* It's pronounced 'can't.' Remember to put the apostrophe in the correct place. Figure it out with a

partner or look here at my sheet if you run into trouble with this one."

The teacher works with the class through the remaining words she had planned -- *coin* in box 10, *vain* in box 11, and *vacant* in box 12. Throughout this work the teacher either pronounces the words or provides clues to help students figure out the word (e.g., "The word that goes in box 10 describes a type of money that includes pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters"), or both. Thus, MWW promotes not only growth in spelling and decoding but also in vocabulary acquisition.

The final word is always the "challenge word." Students are told that it uses all the letters listed, and they are challenged to write the word in the final box. In our example, the final word is *vacation*, which students would write in box 13.

As in Making Words, after all the words have been written in part 1 of MWW, the teacher guides the students to apply what they learned to part 2, where they discover new words that follow or transfer some of the same patterns or principles used in part 1. In the boxes marked T1, T2, and T3 (the *T* stands for *transfer*), the teacher directs students to write words related to those in boxes 1 to 13. In the case of our example, the teacher might ask students to look over the words they have just written and then write such new words as *coil* in box T1, *panda* in T2, and *nation* in T3. Students give it a try, and then talk about the information they used from part 1 to figure out the transfer words in part 2. Of course, the teacher may wish to challenge students with other transfer words beyond the three for which boxes are provided on the MWW sheet.

Part 3 of Making and Writing Words involves students sorting the words they have just written. Using scissors, they cut out each box on the sheet to make individual word cards. Students will work with the cards over several days, so providing envelopes for storage is a good idea.

For word sorting, students organize their cards into categories provided by the teacher. Here are some of the "word sorts" the teacher might pose for the 16 words in our example:

- Sort 1: Words that belong to the *an* family and words that don't
- Sort 2: Words that have one syllable, two syllables, and three or more syllables
- Sort 3: Words that contain digraphs and words that don't
- Sort 4: Words that contain blends and words that don't
- Sort 5: Words that end in *n* and words that don't
- Sort 6: Words that have words within them (e.g., *ant* in *vacant*).

Of course, not all the sorts have to be letter-sound related. Teachers can also have students sort words into semantic or meaning-bearing categories, such as

- Sort 7: Words that describe things and words that don't
- Sort 8: Words that describe how a person might feel and words that don't describe feelings

As students become adept at sorting words, teachers may wish to have them name the categories. Even young children display a surprising degree of creativity in leading this part of Making and Writing Words. For older students, the teacher can modify the activity by having them list the categories on a blank sheet of paper and write the words under the appropriate category, rather than creating cards for manual sorting.

With each new sort, students not only gain added exposure to the words but they also analyze the words from different perspectives. This gives them greater control over and knowledge about how the words are constructed and what they mean.

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Planning for Making and Writing Words

When planning for MWW, the teacher should begin by deciding on the challenge word. Usually this word is

connected with an area of study for the class or with a special event. In the example above, *vacation* could have been chosen because of an upcoming winter, spring, or summer school break. Once the challenge word is determined, teachers simply brainstorm short and longer words that use its letters and develop clues to help students figure them out.

Selection of words for MWW should be guided by the ability of the students. Children at the early elementary level may benefit most from a five- or six-letter challenge word containing one vowel. For seven- to nine-year-old students, a word with six to eight letters and two vowels may be appropriate. Children in the upper elementary grades will be challenged appropriately by a word longer than eight letters and containing three or more vowels. (See Cunningham and Cunningham, 1992, for a good list of initial challenge words and words that can be made from them.)

Making and Writing Words works well with students of almost any age as long as they have some facility in writing. With beginning readers, I recommend the original Making Words activity since it involves manipulation of already printed letters. With students who have some writing fluency (generally seven-year-olds and above), the MWW variation may be an alternative worth exploring. Indeed, the task of writing instead of simply maneuvering letter squares may provide additional practice that will help students internalize the structure and spelling of the words.

Making Words is an excellent activity for helping students develop greater awareness of word structure while gaining important practice in spelling. As with any exemplary instructional strategy, variants that meet the needs of particular students are likely to emerge. Making and Writing Words is a variant of the original strategy that is particularly effective in engaging slightly older students in using letters to form and learn about words.

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